

**Nationalism Against Heroism:  
Joyce's *Ulysses* as a Reversal of the Ethics of Cultural Conquest in Homer's  
*Odyssey***

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Published in 1922, James Joyce's *Ulysses* is a cornerstone of modernist literature. Declan Kiberd claims that, "Before Joyce, no writer of fiction had so foregrounded the process of thinking,"<sup>1</sup> and in fact, Joyce's portrayal of his characters' thoughts is so detailed that his nearly eight-hundred-page epic takes place in the time frame of a single day, June 16<sup>th</sup>, which Joyce fans across the world now celebrate as Bloomsday in honor Joyce's hero, Leopold Bloom. Joyce roughly follows the structure of the *Odyssey*, and each chapter of *Ulysses* corresponds to a particular episode of Homer's epic. *Ulysses*' literary influence is so enormous that the novel easily stands alone as an epic in its own right. However, an analysis of *Ulysses* in the context of Homer reveals that the Irish modernist framework in which Joyce worked offered key influences through which Joyce restructured Homer's *Odyssey*.

Joyce's *Ulysses* follows Homer's *Odyssey* in providing a reinterpretation of heroism. In the *Odyssey*, Homer offers a wise and prudent hero who contrasts with the traditional, Iliadic hero, who is reckless and single-minded in seeking glory. In addition to fighting in the Trojan War like Achilles and Hector, Odysseus travels across the sea, encountering monsters and foreign cultures and using his wit and cleverness to survive. Book IX of the *Odyssey* represents Greek civilization's encounter with one seemingly barbaric and uncivilized foreign society: the Cyclopes. Through trickery and prudence, Odysseus escapes Polyphemus and lives to tell of the savagery of the Cyclopes. Joyce's version of Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops in *Ulysses*

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<sup>1</sup> Declan Kiberd, "*Ulysses*, Modernism's Most Sociable Masterpiece," *The Guardian*, June 16, 2009,

takes place in a bar in Dublin as a debate between two men: Leopold Bloom (Odysseus) and the Citizen (Polyphemus). Joyce adopts Odysseus' wisdom and prudence for Bloom, a Jewish Irishman. Meanwhile, Joyce represents the Cyclops as a man dangerous in his ideology: the nationalist extremist Citizen. Like Odysseus, Bloom employs his intelligence in his verbal battle with the Citizen. However, while Odysseus acts as a cultural imperialist travelling to uncivilized lands and encountering barbarian peoples, Bloom preaches an ideology of peace and love for foreigners. Meanwhile, in the Citizen, Joyce presents the barbarism of Polyphemus as extremist, anti-Semitic nationalism, marking him, rather than his Odysseus, as the cultural imperialist. Joyce coopts Odysseus' prudence and wisdom to characterize his hero, Leopold Bloom, as a proponent of acceptance, rather than invasion and fear of foreign cultures, suggesting that support of conquest and empire has no place in the mentality of a wise, modern hero.

Odysseus functions as an exemplary colonist. Throughout the *Odyssey*, he traverses unfamiliar lands and encounters foreign cultures, becoming a symbol of colonial conquest. The *Odyssey* itself offers a rough picture of Greek culture during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE,<sup>2</sup> which the Romans later reinterpreted as a representation of the “expansion, centuries before, of civilization to Italy and the islands off its western coast.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Etruscans considered Odysseus the hero who initiated their people's westward migration and were determined to continue their cultural identification with him.<sup>4</sup> Today, the term ‘odyssey,’ outside of the context of Homer's epic, refers to an adventure or journey. Centuries of cultural readings focus on Odysseus' strength as an explorer, allowing a characterization of the *Odyssey* as a conquest narrative that supports nations and empires in their mission of colonizing foreign lands.

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<sup>2</sup> Jasper Griffin, *Homer: The Odyssey* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, 77.

The Cyclops episode of the *Odyssey* in particular offers a glimpse into the perspective of a colonist encountering unfamiliar cultures and customs. Odysseus prefaces his meeting with Polyphemus with a list of generalizations about the Cyclopes as a people, describing them as:

Lawless savages who leave everything  
Up to the gods. These people neither plow nor plant,  
But everything grows for them unsown:  
Wheat, barley, and vines that bear  
Clusters of grapes, watered by rain from Zeus.  
They have no assemblies or laws but live  
In high mountain caves, ruling their own  
Children and wives and ignoring each other.<sup>5</sup>

An ambassador of Greek culture, Odysseus observes the differences that separate his own civilization from that of the Cyclopes, determining that the latter's lack of formal legal institutions and dependence on the gods mark it as savage. Furthermore, Book IX of the *Odyssey* takes place during Odysseus' stay with the Phaeacians as Odysseus recounts his adventures since leaving Troy. The contrast between the over-civilized, entertainment-loving Phaeacians<sup>6</sup> and the primitive Cyclopes emphasizes the Cyclopes' lawlessness. Odysseus' process mimics that of colonists throughout history—whether from the Greek or Roman empires, the European Age of Exploration that began in the fourteenth century, or modern attempts at the westernization of foreign countries. Equating difference with barbarism, the colonist asserts the superiority of his own culture, often seeking to 'civilize' the unlearned, 'savage' cultures he encounters. Odysseus explores the island of the Cyclopes out of curiosity rather than an intention to civilize, stating, "I

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<sup>5</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000), IX.105-12.

<sup>6</sup> Griffin, 85.

want to find out what those men are like,/Wild savages with no sense of right or wrong/Or hospitable folk who fear the gods.”<sup>7</sup> However, his preconception of the Cyclopes as barbaric reflects European colonists’ attitudes towards non-western cultures.

Polyphemus confirms several stereotypes of the uncivilized foreigner. Invoking the Greek custom of *xenia*, the expectation that guests be treated hospitably and courteously, Odysseus requests from the Cyclops “the gifts that are due to strangers.”<sup>8</sup> Polyphemus responds with the ultimate demonstration of ignorance, contempt for the gods: “Cyclopes/Don’t care about Zeus or his aegis/Or the blessed gods,” he says, “since we are much stronger.”<sup>9</sup> In a display of this disregard for the Olympians and their customs, Polyphemus eats several of Odysseus’ men whole, an act that prompts Odysseus to compare the Cyclops to a “mountain lion,”<sup>10</sup> emphasizing the animalistic nature of his barbarism and the lack of civilization and humanity of non-Greek cultures. Edith Hall notes that cannibalism is a “standard trope in the xenophobic polemic of nearly every culture and era,”<sup>11</sup> and thus Polyphemus’ human consumption plays into existing stereotypes and fears of foreign peoples. Unsurprisingly, popular interest in teratology, or monster studies, peaked during the first great period of European colonization,<sup>12</sup> and as encounters with foreignness became common across Europe, the Cyclops figure rose in prominence. Europe’s adoption of monster myths allowed an epic (and thus exaggerated) condemnation of foreign barbarism as well as a justification for colonists like Odysseus to invade unexplored lands and spread familiar, western values across the globe.

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<sup>7</sup> Homer, IX.169-71.

<sup>8</sup> Homer, IX.260.

<sup>9</sup> Homer, IX.266-68.

<sup>10</sup> Homer, IX.285.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Hall, 91.

Joyce's *Ulysses* represents a growing discomfort with colonialism in Europe. Even though he follows the structure of the *Odyssey* and bases his protagonist, Leopold Bloom, on Odysseus, Joyce transfers the attitude of cultural imperialism from his hero to his monster. The Citizen's name indicates his overvaluation of his Irish identity: wearing the name as a title, he demonstrates his pride in the formality of his Irishness and his willingness to belong fully to Ireland. In contrast, Bloom defines a nation as "the same people living in the same place,"<sup>13</sup> and because he lives in Ireland, he identifies as Irish. The Citizen, however, scoffs at the thought of Bloom as Irish because Bloom, a Jewish man, "retains an ancestral yearning for Zion,"<sup>14</sup> and thus, according to the Citizen, is not truly and wholly Irish. He sarcastically refers to Bloom as "the new Messiah for Ireland,"<sup>15</sup> refusing to accept Bloom as both a Jew and an Irishman.

In his discussion of other nations and peoples, the Citizen argues that foreigners are "swindling the peasants... and the poor of Ireland," adding, "we want no more strangers in our house."<sup>16</sup> While the Citizen's words are immediately recognizable as a reference to Polyphemus' xenophobia upon first meeting Odysseus,<sup>17</sup> they also match Odysseus' basic belief in the cultural superiority of the Greeks and the destructive influence of other peoples. The Citizen and Odysseus present their nationalisms differently because the nations they represent have different needs. Odysseus' Greece seeks expansion and colonization while the Citizen's Ireland, less powerful than the Greek empire, hopes to defend itself and insulate itself from outsiders. While Odysseus intends to expand the Greek civilization to foreign, uncivilized lands,

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<sup>13</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922 (Paris: Shakespeare and Company, reprint, ed. Danis Rose, London: Picador, 1997), 316.

<sup>14</sup> W. B. Stanford, W. B., *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), 220.

<sup>15</sup> Joyce, 322.

<sup>16</sup> Joyce, 309.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Prescott, "Homer's *Odyssey* and Joyce's *Ulysses*," *Modern Language Quarterly* (Duke University Press, 1942), 437.

the Citizen displays his nationalist instincts in his call for an embargo on foreign immigration to Ireland. Despite their different methods, Odysseus, Polyphemus, and the Citizen all regard their own cultures as superior to others, a perspective Joyce condemns in *Ulysses*.

Joyce's decision to characterize his Cyclops' monstrosity as a dangerously nationalistic attitude follows a trend developed by Immanuel Kant to "redefine the one-eyedness of the Cyclops as narrow-mindedness."<sup>18</sup> Hall notes that Joyce's Cyclops chapter "is perhaps the first text *critically* to identify Cyclopean monocularity with ethnic narrow-mindedness: there, drinking in his 'cave' within Barney Kiernan's pub, is the huge, belligerent Cyclops... the obsessive Fenian anti-semite Citizen baits the Jewish hero mercilessly."<sup>19</sup> The concept of narrow-mindedness in reference to cultural differences is not present in Homer's *Odyssey*. Instead, Homer exalts Odysseus, with his Greek identity, as an explorer and colonist. Joyce, however, writing in Europe in the early twentieth century, experienced the perils of nationalist and imperialist sentiment firsthand. A peace-loving man, he moved his family to neutral Switzerland in 1915 during the First World War. While he rarely discussed politics, he "opposed the war on pacifist grounds"<sup>20</sup> and his distaste for violence is visible in *Ulysses*. In his Cyclops chapter, the word "bloody" appears sixty-nine times, more than it appeared in all of his previous works combined.<sup>21</sup> This excessive count demonstrates the violence inherent in the Citizen's verbal promotion of nationalism.

Moreover, while Joyce was working on *Ulysses*, Ireland experienced numerous national crises, including the Easter Uprising of 1916, the subsequent British assassinations of several

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<sup>18</sup> Hall, 92.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, 92.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Groden, "Joyce at Work on 'Cyclops': Toward a Biography of *Ulysses*," James Joyce Quarterly 44.2 (2007), 228.

<sup>21</sup> Leah Culligan Flack, *Modernism and Homer: The Odysseys of H.D., James Joyce, Osip Mandelstam, and Ezra Pound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 105.

Irish leaders, the Anglo-Irish War that commenced in 1919, and Irish politicians' refusal to sit in the English Parliament.<sup>22</sup> These events reflect tensions between the Irish and the British and reveal Irish nationalism as a dividing force that led to violence and an unwillingness to negotiate. Joyce was "opposed to nationalisms of any kind and, especially as nationalistic sentiments grew in Ireland, rejected any solution to the war based on nationalism,"<sup>23</sup> so his decision to demonize nationalism in the form of the aggressive Citizen directly reflects his concern for political extremist attitudes in Ireland. Michael Groden suggests that Anglo-Irish revivalism, "which granted a privileged status to the Anglo-Irish within Irish culture"<sup>24</sup> was a specific target of Joyce's, a conclusion that seems likely given the Citizen's refusal to accept Bloom, a Jew, as a true Irishman.

Joyce emphasizes his break from Homer's portrayal of colonialism by playing with identity swaps throughout his Cyclops chapter. Joyce initially (jokingly) suggests the Citizen as the protagonist of the chapter, describing him as a "broadshouldered deepchested stronglimbed frankeyed redhaired freelyfreckled shaggybearded widemouthed largenosed longheaded deepvoiced barekneed brawnyhanded hairylegged ruddyfaced sinewyarmed hero."<sup>25</sup> This initial conflation of Odyssean characteristics ("hero") and Cyclopean characteristics (physical enormity) prefaces Joyce's decision to reverse his hero's stance on cultural imperialism. Joyce opens his Cyclops chapter with another switch: as the unnamed narrator walks down a Dublin street, a chimney sweep "near [drives] his gear into [the narrator's] eye."<sup>26</sup> This detail, relatively unnecessary to Joyce's story, recalls Odysseus' blinding of Polyphemus, again providing a play on identities, as, momentarily, the narrator becomes Polyphemus and a chimney sweeper takes

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<sup>22</sup> Groden, 230.

<sup>23</sup> Groden, 228.

<sup>24</sup> Groden, 231.

<sup>25</sup> Joyce, 283.

<sup>26</sup> Joyce, 279.

on the role of Odysseus. Joyce's narrator remains anonymous throughout the entire chapter, a stylistic decision that serves both as a continual reference to Odysseus' "Noman is my name"<sup>27</sup> as well as a continuation of Joyce's identity swaps. Additionally, Joyce never reveals his Cyclops' true name, allowing the Citizen, as well, to remain relatively anonymous. Joseph Prescott describes this transfer of anonymity from Odysseus-Bloom to the Cyclops-Citizen and the narrator as an "example of bifurcation"<sup>28</sup> by which Joyce takes features of the *Odyssey*, moves them to fit his own needs, and adapts the *Odyssey*'s ethics for his own time. Homer's use of anonymity in the Cyclops episode acts as a convenient tool for Joyce's reinterpretation by allowing him to use his play on a Homeric plot to recast his monster as a violent nationalist and his hero as a pacifist.

In conjunction with his revision of Homer's Cyclops, Joyce must adapt his Odysseus to counter the monster of violent, nationalistic cultural imperialism. Considering that Odysseus himself demonstrates both violence and cultural imperialism in Book IX of the *Odyssey*, Joyce must focus on the translation of other Odyssean qualities into the twentieth century. According to Jasper Griffin, the *Odyssey* "created a tension between two types of heroism: the dashing Iliadic fighter like Achilles, pitted against other heroes in equal battle, and the wily opponent of giants and witches, who must use guile against overwhelming force and impossible odds."<sup>29</sup> Griffin argues that Odysseus "stands closer to the common attitudes of men" because he demonstrates attentiveness to his men's hunger and basic needs, and because he brings home a lot of treasure, revealing that he cares about material riches and providing for his family.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, while Achilles bristles at the slightest insult, Odysseus "must show himself a

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<sup>27</sup> Homer, IX.364.

<sup>28</sup> Prescott, 438.

<sup>29</sup> Griffin, 90.

<sup>30</sup> Griffin, 92.



survivor, prepared to bed, to use guile, to accept humiliations, to conceal his feelings.”<sup>31</sup> The contrast between traditional heroes like Achilles and Odysseus clearly manifests in the two heroes’ fates. Achilles dies dramatically in battle, but Odysseus dies of old age at home in Ithaca. Odysseus is the original everyman, the hero who survives, whatever the cost, rather than the hero who dies in a blaze of glory. Joyce expands upon Odysseus’ common attitudes to characterize Bloom as an ordinary Dubliner, a perfect everyman. His entire story takes place during one day as he wanders from neighborhood to neighborhood in Dublin and ponders the state of his marriage. His heroism manifests not in dramatic encounters with physical monsters but in his pacifist beliefs. Joyce coopts Homer’s Odysseus to produce Leopold Bloom as an ordinary hero who uses words rather than brute strength to battle the extremist Citizen.

Bloom responds to the Citizen’s ethnic insults and nationalist bravado with a pacifist ideology. After describing the plight of Jews throughout history, he argues, “Force, hatred, history, all that. That’s not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it’s the very opposite of that that is really life.... Love.”<sup>32</sup> In developing Bloom’s character further, Joyce suggests that Bloom has arrived at this viewpoint after careful consideration, contrasting the Citizen’s rash generalizations about foreigners. Bloom acts as the “prudent member”<sup>33</sup> of the group at the bar, refusing to drink with the other men. When the men, led by the Citizen, begin to gossip about Joe Brady, a man who got an erection as he was being hanged, Bloom responds, “That can be explained by science,”<sup>34</sup> demonstrating his maturity and wisdom in contrast to the other men’s childish humor. As the men continue to discuss capital punishment, Bloom “comes out with the why and the wherefore and all the codology of the

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<sup>31</sup> Griffin, 90.

<sup>32</sup> Joyce, 318.

<sup>33</sup> Joyce, 290.

<sup>34</sup> Joyce, 291.

business,”<sup>35</sup> establishing himself as a knowledgeable man. Later, when the Citizen lays the blame on foreigners for Ireland’s problems, Bloom again responds with “moderation.”<sup>36</sup> This care, thoughtfulness, and moderation directly corresponds to Odysseus’ style of intelligent heroism.

Book IX of the *Odyssey* exemplifies Odysseus’ wily brand of heroism. First, he lies and tells Polyphemus that his ship was “smashed... to pieces”<sup>37</sup> so that the Cyclops won’t go searching for his men and goods. Then, he decides not to kill Polyphemus while he sleeps<sup>38</sup> because doing so would leave him and his men trapped in the cave, unable to move the boulder door away from the entrance. He even gives Polyphemus a fake name: “Noman,”<sup>39</sup> cleverly hiding his identity. Odysseus also engineers an elaborate escape by getting the Cyclops drunk, blinding him, and tying his men beneath the sheep that Polyphemus leads out of the cave.<sup>40</sup> Joyce uses these features of Odysseus—knowledgeability, prudence, moderation, thoughtfulness—in crafting his own hero. While Odysseus also acts as a colonist and a proponent of the superiority of Greek culture, Joyce focuses on Odysseus as a man of wisdom and consequently is able to build a character whose views on foreigners directly contrast with those of Homer’s hero. In a 1907 lecture, Joyce described his own vision for Ireland, promoting a nation that is “an immense woven fabric in which very different elements are mixed... In such a fabric, it is pointless searching for a thread that has remained pure, virgin, and uninfluenced by

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<sup>35</sup> Joyce, 291.

<sup>36</sup> Joyce, 310.

<sup>37</sup> Homer, IX.275.

<sup>38</sup> Homer, IX.296.

<sup>39</sup> Homer, IX.364.

<sup>40</sup> Homer, IX.425.

other threads nearby.”<sup>41</sup> Odysseus and the Citizen would disdain this mixing of cultures, but Bloom, with his modern twist on Odyssean wisdom, understands and supports Joyce’s vision.

However, while Odysseus acts wisely and prudently for the majority of his time on the island of the Cyclopes, upon escaping the cave and returning to his ship, he “yields to a temptation of heroism in revealing his own name in a shout of triumph.”<sup>42</sup> This display of traditional, boastful heroism constitutes a clear mistake for Odysseus: knowing Odysseus’ identity, Polyphemus is able to call to his father Poseidon, saying, “Grant that Odysseus, son of Laertes, / May never reach his home on Ithaca.”<sup>43</sup> While bold heroism as found in heroes such as Achilles and Hector may have been admired in Homer’s Greece, these same traits in Odysseus are character flaws, proving that Odysseus is more successful in employing trickery than in flaunting brute strength. This style of heroism, despite its success, is often viewed as less honest and thus as less likable. Stephen Minta notes that “Odysseus has been loathed or mistrusted for far longer in the European tradition than he has been admired.”<sup>44</sup> Yet, Odysseus is the hero whom Joyce referred to “as the only ‘complete man’ in literature.”<sup>45</sup> His mistakes, his internal struggles, his non-heroic attitudes, his trickery and intelligence, mark him as a character whom Joyce believed was worthy of recreation as a hero for the twentieth century.

Like Odysseus, Bloom ultimately allows his temper to get the best of him. Enraged, he shouts at the Citizen, “Your God was a Jew. Christ was a Jew like me.”<sup>46</sup> In response, the Citizen throws a tin biscuit box at Bloom, an action reminiscent of Polyphemus hurling rocks at

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<sup>41</sup> Flack, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Griffin, 93.

<sup>43</sup> Homer, IX.528-29.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Minta, “Homer and Joyce: The Case of Nausicaa,” *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon*, ed. Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 93.

<sup>45</sup> Minta, 94.

<sup>46</sup> Joyce, 327.

Odysseus' ship. Where the encounter between Odysseus and Polyphemus is a battle of two individuals, Bloom and the Citizen argue on behalf of the identities that they represent. Bloom, with his final words to the Citizen, seeks glory not for himself and his own name, as Odysseus does, but for his Jewish heritage. Joyce considered *Ulysses* "the epic of two races (Israel-Ireland),"<sup>47</sup> and this division becomes visible in the conflict between Bloom and the Citizen. Initially, Bloom successfully represents both races—Irish and Jewish—but when he yields to his anger, he fuels the ethnic divide.

Joyce's epic falls within a movement that began in the late nineteenth-century of rejecting of colonial values and treating the Cyclops with sympathy. Contemporary readings of the *Odyssey* often cast Polyphemus as the narrator, a style that "tries to imagine what it *felt like to be the Cyclops*, that turns him into the *subject* of the narrative rather than its *object*."<sup>48</sup> According to this school of interpretation, pioneered by the Frankfurt School, the Cyclopes' single eye is "no more nor less than a marker of radical *difference*."<sup>49</sup> Joyce, however, writing *Ulysses* early on in the development of sympathy for Polyphemus, maintains Odysseus as his protagonist and hero but rejects colonialism by reversing his hero's stance on cultural imperialism. Clearly conscious of and unhappy with the attitude of ethnic antagonism that struck Ireland (and all of Europe) during the early nineteenth century, Joyce writes a hero to counter these sentiments. However, as an admirer of Odysseus as a character, he does not go so far as to cast the Cyclops as his protagonist, preferring instead to suggest that Odysseus' wisdom and prudence would translate into the twentieth century in the form of a moderate and accepting stance on cultural integration.

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<sup>47</sup> Hall, 52-53.

<sup>48</sup> Hall, 95.

<sup>49</sup> Hall, 95.

Following the modernist tradition of writing internal conflicts of the mind, Joyce's Cyclops chapter reimagines Homer's Cyclops episode by visualizing not a physical conflict between individuals, but an ideological conflict between cultures. Joyce writes a hero who, much like Odysseus, demonstrates his abilities and qualities through his prudence and knowledge. However, while Odysseus acts as a colonist bringing Greek civilization to barbarian foreign lands, Leopold Bloom employs his Odyssean wisdom with the opposite goal: the promotion of cultural integration in Ireland. By taking the structure of Homer's *Odyssey* and including many allusions to Homer and ancient epics as a genre, Joyce joins Homer's mission of redefining heroism in the form of an everyman, someone who succeeds through his perseverance and forethought rather than through brute strength and recklessness. Conscious of twentieth-century ideals and realities, Joyce suggests that modern heroism manifests in the acceptance rather than conquest of other peoples.

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